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ABSTRACT

Although transition services and plans for youth with disabilities are mandated by age 16 by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a need clearly exists to provide transition services before age 16. The literature documents the need for transition programs that develop problem-solving skills, career awareness, an interest in future planning, knowledge of how to access community resources, and family involvement. A transition planning program at a middle school in a rural community incorporates these elements. An initial survey of 101 employers, special education teachers, transition specialists, educational administrators, and adult service providers from rural Louisiana indicated a need for extensive parental involvement in transition planning. During the first year of the program, the teacher sent letters to parents to encourage participation. The teacher implemented a Transition Planning Unit designed to develop problem-solving skills, career awareness, an interest in future planning, and knowledge of community resources. Parent involvement was actively encouraged throughout the program. Activities during the first and second year included a speakers bureau on various careers, student projects on a particular career, a role-play of job interviews, a rating by students and parents of each student's work-related characteristics, community-based field trips, and a career awareness week. Student and parent outcomes are listed. (KS)

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PARTNERS FOR TRANSITION: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE

Our society holds many expectations for youth leaving school. Expectations of young adults upon entering the working world include earning a decent wage, interacting appropriately with co-workers, and advancing within an organizational structure (Chadsey-Rusch, Rusch, & O'Reilly, 1991). Youth are also expected to live as independently as possible and to develop satisfactory social and interpersonal relationships in their communities. Unfortunately, postschool outcomes for youths with disabilities in the areas of employment, independent living, and social/personal relations are discouraging (e.g., Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Sitlington, Frank, & Carson, 1993).

In response to these issues "transition services and plans" for youth with disabilities are now mandated by The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Public Law 101-476, 1990). In addition to defining transition services, the IDEA provides guidelines regarding **when** services should be provided. According to Section 602(a)(2), transition services may be provided to special education students beginning at age 14 or younger, when appropriate, but **must** be provided by age 16. Data regarding the number of students with disabilities who exit school without completing their educational program support the need for transition services before age 16.

With the mandate to provide transition services for students with disabilities, there is a critical need to more fully involve parents and family members in special education programs. Researchers and practitioners have argued that parents and family members are a key variable, and perhaps the key variable, in transition planning and subsequent success in adult life (Benz & Halpern, 1987; McNair & Rusch, 1991). However, parents often lack knowledge about key issues related to the education of their child, such as legal rights, an understanding of the IEP/ITP process, and an understanding of the child's exceptionality.

The need for parent/family involvement in special education programs has been recognized at least since the enactment of P.L. 94-142, yet research over the past 15 years has indicated that parents often remain passive participants (See Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990 for discussion). Numerous barriers to parent participation have been reported in the literature. Parents often report logistical barriers, such as lack of transportation, as well as feelings of inferiority, and difficulties in communicating with school personnel. With regard to contact between teachers and parents, in a study

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by Benz and Halpern (1987) "over half (57%) of the parents [surveyed] reported that contact with their child's teacher occurred only once per term or less" (p. 509). This pattern of lack of involvement is of particular concern as more attention is focused on transition services for students with disabilities and as the role of parents and family members in this process is recognized. Today, there is agreement that schools should introduce transition planning earlier with the assistance of educators, adult service providers, employers, and most importantly, parents and family members (e.g., Lichtenstein, 1993).

Transition Planning at the Middle School Level

A need clearly exists to provide transition services to many students with disabilities **before** age 16, even students with mild disabilities. Several researchers and practitioners have argued that transition planning should be developed over time, beginning during elementary school or at least by middle school/junior high (e.g., Getzel, 1990; Sitlington, Frank, & Carson, 1993). Sitlington et al. (1993) assert that "the bridge between school and adult life should be built beginning at least in the junior high school years" (p. 232). Several key elements of transition programs for students with mild disabilities have been described in the literature. Effective strategies designed to develop problem solving skills, career awareness, an interest in future planning, knowledge of how to access community resources, and family involvement are needed.

Problem solving. Many students with disabilities lack appropriate skills for solving daily problems. Students need exposure to real-life situations in different settings in order to effectively solve problems. According to Mithaug, Martin, and Agran (1987), "The ability to solve problems in different settings appears to be critical to postschool employment success" (p. 501).

Career awareness. Sitlington et al. (1993) proposed that transition planning should involve career awareness early in the student's educational program. Fisher and Clark (1992) suggested that career awareness could easily be infused into many academic areas at the middle school level. Sitlington et al. advocate that students and parents at this level should begin to examine different career environments. In addition, students at the middle school level should begin developing their own strengths, interests, and needs so they may begin considering future outcomes involving employment.

Future planning. Upon graduation from high school, youth with disabilities and their parents face many difficult decisions concerning the future. Some of the issues facing students and family members involve not only employment, but also transportation, housing, financial stability, and community involvement. Miller, La Follette, and Green (1990) reported that parents felt unprepared to assume a leadership role in transition planning for their son/daughter. Based on their research, Miller et al. state that for parents "Planning for an uncertain and distant future is often not considered important, necessary, or timely" (p. 54). They further argue that

"Participation of parents in future planning must be cultivated" (p. 55).

Access to community resources. There are several resources in the community that students must learn to use effectively if they are to experience successful outcomes as adults. For example, Karge, Patton, and de la Garza (1992) stated that students need to develop transportation skills and that transition programs must address the need for recreation activities. Repeated exposure in the community to banking, retail, medical, transportation, recreational, and services offered by churches and clubs supports generalization of learned skills. In addition, students gain awareness of future career interests as they explore the various opportunities offered by the community.

Family Involvement. In a recent survey investigating transition services for youth with mild disabilities, respondents (both students and professionals) "agreed that there is a significant difference between the current level of parent involvement and the need for such involvement" (Karge, et al., p. 64). Strategies designed to increase parent/family involvement in special education programs have focused, for example, on improved communication, use of advocates in IEP conferences, and parent training and education (See Boone, 1992 for discussion). However, often these strategies have been based on traditional parent/professional interactions. When parents are assigned the role of "recipient of professionals' decisions" they are expected to interact in a passive manner and to defer to professionals. Additionally, Turnbull and Turnbull (1990) argue that parents have preferences regarding the manner in which they receive information and these preferences should be respected.

Family Involvement in Rural Areas. Issues relative to successful transition in rural areas must be considered. "It is important to understand that school-to-adulthood activities must be planned in the context of the local community" (Wehman, 1990, p. 40). Problem areas that may impact on students' transition from school to work in rural areas include: availability of work, adequacy of resources and finances, lack of transportation systems, securing of volunteer support, and need for personnel to assist with placements (Helge, 1984). Additionally, partnerships among schools, parents, and potential employers may not be fully developed in rural communities. With regard to family involvement in rural areas, Elliot (1988) proposed that inservice training for parents, educational personnel, administrators, and agency personnel be developed, that parent information and support groups be established, and that parents and students receive training in how to access adult service providers. Parents and families at the middle school level are the key to effective transition, especially in rural areas.

Program Background

A transition planning program at a middle school level in a rural community will be presented as an example of how key elements delineated in the literature can be combined with innovative approaches to develop family/professional partnerships. The design of this transition planning program was based on a review of the literature,

interviews with rural community leaders, and a survey investigating attitudes and opinions regarding roles and responsibilities of parents in the transition process.

The survey was administered to employers, special education teachers, transition specialists, educational administrators, and adult service providers from rural areas of Louisiana. One hundred and one individuals responded to 16 statements and 4 open ended questions concerning the roles and responsibilities of parents in the transition planning process. The results indicated that a majority of the respondents believe parents should act as case managers and advocates, assume leadership positions in parent/professional organizations, and assist their child with remediation of certain skills at home. Furthermore, a majority of the respondents recommended that parent responsibilities should include the following: provide transportation to and from the community based experience and later to and from the job site; inventory the availability of human resources through extended family and friends; collaborate with schools and adult agencies; maintain the lines of communication with all members of the transition planning team; and monitor progress of written objectives on the IEP/ITP.

Respondents expressed the view that parents should let go of their children with a disability and let them grow to adulthood. They also suggested that parents should allow their adolescent child to experience failure, and treat their child as they would an individual without a disability. Furthermore, participants proposed that parents could help their adolescent be successful in the transition process by teaching self-discipline, demanding that their child be fully integrated into the community, talking with their child about the future in realistic terms, and teaching self-advocacy.

Middle School Transition Planning Program

In Year 1 of this program efforts focused on both direct and indirect means of promoting parent/family involvement. Emphasis was placed on developing parents' awareness and knowledge, as well as, strategies for coping with issues related to transition from school to adult life.

* At the beginning of the school year the teacher initiated a series of informal letters sent to parents to convey information and invite participation in the child's educational program.
* The stage was set for the entire year with the inclusion of a logo on all correspondence designed to encourage parents to begin thinking and asking questions about their child's future.
* Parents were asked to sign and return a statement indicating their willingness to "explore the future with my child."

During the life skills instructional period, the teacher implemented a Transition Planning Unit designed to develop problem solving skills, career awareness, an interest in future planning, and knowledge of community resources. Parent involvement was actively encouraged throughout the program. Selected strategies will be presented.

Problem Solving

* Speakers Bureau. Individuals from various career areas were invited to present information on their particular job. Over the school year, speakers included the vice principal of the school, a policeman, a cafeteria worker, owner of a greenhouse business, and a local store owner. Each speaker described his/her job and work environment, and assigned students a "problem to solve" at home. Students were responsible for asking speakers relevant questions, for seeking parent help in solving the problem, and for sharing solutions in school the next day. Parent involvement was encouraged in the following manner: first, parents were asked to participate as speakers and/or were enlisted to locate speakers for the program; second, parents were asked to attend presentations; and third, parents were asked to help their child solve the assigned problems.

Career Awareness

* Student project. Each student interviewed two individuals employed in a single career area and developed a formal presentation. During the presentation the student was responsible for discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the career investigated, developing and sharing a handout/visual display, and answering questions about the career. Students were videotaped delivering their presentation.

Future Planning

* Survey. Students collected data from family members and friends regarding sources of employment for those individuals. This information was discussed in class and the students developed a bar graph to display their findings. Students discovered that the main sources of information on employment opportunities were family members and friends.

* Role-play activity. A role-play activity was developed to provide students with knowledge of appropriate clothing and behavior and practice in being interviewed. A teacher, unknown to the students, conducted the interviews. Students selected a job and had no prior knowledge of the questions that would be asked during the interview. Students were videotaped during the interview and then had an opportunity to evaluate their performance. They were provided with suggestions on how they could improve their appearance and performance in a job interview.

Accessing Community Resources

* Community-based field trips. The teacher identified potential job sites and community resources for the students. Field trips were planned so that students could learn more about jobs and services provided by the following:

a police station, plant nursery, fire station, post office, City Hall, building materials store, and grocery.

Final Year 1 Activities

* Choice Career Characteristics Project. First, based on previous career-related activities, students developed a list of essential work-related characteristics, interpersonal skills, and appropriate behaviors based on social/community expectations. Following this group activity, the teacher used the list in individual student conferences to identify strengths and weaknesses. The list was sent home with a letter to parents requesting that the parent circle a perceived area of weakness and star (*) a strength for their child. Additional comments were also requested. Finally, another student conference with the teacher was held during which parental input was discussed. One/two areas of weakness were selected by the student, and emphasis was placed on development of these characteristics in subsequent activities.

* Career Awareness-Education Week. During this week Army and Navy recruiters, school administrators, and vocational school representatives spoke on topics of interest related to the future for these middle school students. Students also participated in field trips to an adult education program, a vocational technical school, and the local university. Parents were notified of activities and were again prompted to consider the future of their child. They were encouraged to participate in as many activities as possible.

ASK QUESTIONS OF YOUR SON/DAUGHTER.....
"Have you considered...?
"What do you think about the possibility of...?

????? 5 YEARS FROM NOW....5 YEARS FROM NOW...?????
WHAT ? WHERE ? HOW?

Year 2 Program Modifications

* Speakers Bureau. Students and parents have recruited all but one of the presenters for the Speakers Bureau. Participants include a truck driver, mortician, limousine driver, auto parts clerk, bricklayer, and daycare owner.

* Community-Based Field Trips. The activities in the community have resulted in greater visibility for the students. The Garden Club invited students to maintain a garden in the center of town as a community service project. Additionally, students volunteered to bake and decorate treats for individuals receiving home health care in the community. Students have also been invited to submit articles on school activities for publication in the local newspaper.

* Transition Planning Rating Scale. Parents and students individually completed this scale rating the student on items in the areas of: prevocational skills, domestic skills, community skills, recreation/leisure, social/personal skills, and self-advocacy skills. A conference was held with the teacher and similarities and differences in ratings on specific items were discussed. Behaviors were targeted for intervention and students were taught to use self-monitoring techniques, rather than rely on teachers/adults to monitor behavior and determine consequences.

Student Outcomes

1. Students have participated in Student Council, "Just Say No" drug prevention activities, sports, and science and social studies fairs.
2. Students have been observed asking questions, displaying problem solving skills, and using appropriate social skills.
3. Students have obtained a greater acceptance by school faculty and staff.
4. Students have gained more acceptance from their nondisabled peers at school.
5. Students have developed notions of good citizenship and volunteerism as a result of greater community participation.

Parent/Family Outcomes

1. Parents have acquired knowledge of their child's capabilities and interests.
2. Parents have acquired knowledge of services available when their child exits from school.
3. Parents have developed a stronger partnership with the teacher.
4. Parent involvement has increased across the child's education program.
5. Parents are better prepared for more formal transition planning at the secondary level. This program has helped to prepare parents to ask questions and take a more active role in making decisions regarding their child's educational program and future.

Conclusion

Specific strategies are needed that encourage parent/family involvement in transition planning. The level or extent of this involvement appears to be critical to the success of a student's program. McNair and Rusch (1991) suggested that it is "the responsibility of the transition team to seek out parents and offer a range of involvement opportunities from which they can choose, acting with the assumption that parents generally do desire involvement" (p. 99). Programs such as the one described demonstrate the importance of initiating transition activities at the middle school level. Strategies for increasing parent involvement are infused throughout the program and allow parents and family members to choose the level of involvement desired. Parent and family involvement is essential for effective transition planning, especially in rural areas.

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